

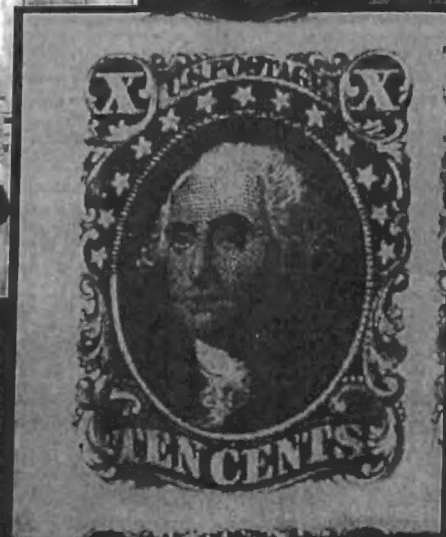
# The American Stamp Dealer & Collector

No. 25

November-December 2008



Stamp dealing with  
Richard Ginensky along  
New York's famed Nassau Street  
in the days of yore.



\$161,000 is realized at a  
Nutmeg auction for a stamp  
cataloging \$5,500! See page 9.

# Richard Ginensky & Stamp Dealing On Old Nassau Street

[Editor's Note: Our readers know that, if there is one thing that this magazine is all about, it's the story of the people of philately. They also know that there was once a true "Coney Island Just for Stamp Collectors" along old Nassau Street in lower Manhattan. We are delighted to introduce Robert DeLena, a talented writer and knowledgeable philatelist, whose story of a Nassau Street legend, we trust, will captivate you as it did your editors when we first read it.]

By Robert DeLena

**I** remember my first drive from our Bronx apartment into Manhattan. It was 1959 and I was eight. I kept looking up at the tall buildings hoping to catch sight of King Kong when my dad pointed out the window. There are men dressed in suits and ties and armed with attaché cases.

"They speak the same language we do but you won't understand them," he said.

"It is English but they use different words. To us it is like a foreign language." He explained.

Three out of four of my grandparents were not able to speak English. My dad did not complete high school but did possess wisdom. He made clichés come to life. "Pick your friends wisely," he repeated often, "You define yourself by the friends you keep."

Around that time, my mom paid \$2 for a stamp album. I showed it to my friend whose mother paid \$1 for his. My album far outclassed his. In those days, department stores wanted as little as 50 cents to one dollar for a packet of stamps. This was far too pricey. For 10 cents, you could get a rubber ball and play stickball all day. Besides, my friend bought one of those packets, which contained all stamps from France. Hardly any of them filled in the pictures of any of our books.

Still stamps filled a void. With each of them, it was fun to decipher what country they came from. Like the men in Manhattan, they spoke English but it was different. Helvetia meant Switzerland, Sverige meant Sweden and Magyar was Hungary. Slowly I was becoming an expert.

Below, from left: Richard Ginensky, sons Adam and Daniel, and father, Sydney.



And suddenly it is 1975.

Freshly minted, but lightly hinged out of college, I secured a position at a firm just across from the mayor's office in New York City. My earnings were meager (\$10,000 annualized) but I had already won a major journalism award and graduated from one of the best journalism schools in our country—Syracuse University's Newhouse School of Communications.

During my lunch hour, I walked a couple of blocks and stumbled upon Nassau Street. Here my childhood hobby came to life. Stamp store after stamp store lined both sides of the block. I walked into a few, but stayed only until the owner would ask what I wanted. There was little budget for a childhood hobby and I was not going to be pressured. Then I saw a "going out of business" sign. I opened the door at 140 Nassau Street and entered Richard's Stamp Shop.

Upon coming into the store, you walked down a center aisle created by tables laid end to end lengthwise. Behind the tables on the right side was a coin dealer with one customer. On the left were several people including Richard Ginensky. Unlike the coin dealer, customers surrounded him.

There were young stockbrokers who passed hundred dollar bills in exchange for albums wrapped in butcher paper with a handle. There were a couple of elderly men sitting at the far end of the tables browsing albums at their leisure. There were also a couple of other people waiting their turn to speak with Richard.

"May I help you?" was Richard's simple request. I was looking only to pass my lunch hour. I responded that I just wanted to look around. Surprisingly, he was not annoyed at my request and I watched him handle several customers. He began asking me questions and I, in turn, asked him questions about his business. Then a common interest surfaced—we both loved books. We also both had written short stories, which we promised to share with each other. I had made a friend who was thirty years my senior. He would remain my friend until his death 30 years later.

And so began my routine that lasted for almost two years. Almost every lunch hour I would go visit Richard. I took up stamp collecting again and found it even more interesting than I did when I was eight years old. With his encouragement and guidance, I also started to sell some stamps through the mail to supplement my income. But mostly, I would watch him work. He enjoyed talking with me about philosophy, religion, and politics in between taking care of his customers. I enjoyed his sense of humor and his business sense, which differed from others.

The store was an intellectual treat. There were the vest pocket dealers who would make a small amount of money by purchasing stamps and cataloging them. Some did it for the money; others for the fun and for a bit more profit than doing the crossword puzzles. On a slightly higher scale were some people who put together small collections and would shop them around Nassau Street looking for the best price. Adam, the eldest of his two sons, remembers a man named Timmy, who found it was simpler just to deal with his father rather than shop around the various other stores.

On the other end of the spectrum were the people who had amassed large collections of mint sheets and were now ready to harvest their steady efforts. Beginning in the 1930s, many people began buying postage stamps by the sheets and saving them in anticipation of rises in prices. This glutted the market so that the best one could hope for was to get 90 percent, sometimes less, of their original cost, which, of course, was face value.

Some of them first learned of their folly at Richard's store. He was always patient with them, as the initial shock of disbelief would take effect. Others already had heard the bad news from other dealers. Richard's was just one more stop on their way to confirming that their once-high hopes of profit were shattered. Most refused to sell. Richard patiently explained how much more money they could earn if they put their money to work in other investments. They somehow believed that holding onto their collection for a few more years would result in a change in the market that had not occurred in the past forty years.

There were many other "types" of customers, but the most fun were just the normal customers. They would enter the store and tell Richard what they were looking for. He would listen and think for a while. Then he would turn and look at his shelves filled with white heavy-duty cardboard boxes. On each box, in black dri-mark, was scribbled a description only Richard could interpret. One of the boxes would come down and be opened for inspection.

Opening each box was like opening your surprise birthday presents. Sometimes the box contained stamps you only saw in catalogues. Other times, there were stamps you never knew even existed.

It was like being in a museum, only better. With each box opening, came the stories. You would learn of their history, value, or anything else that made these pieces of paper glitter brighter than a diamond. Richard, the writer, the philosopher, the expert in social sciences, describing the contents and everyone in the store listens.

In those moments, stamp collecting became not just an interesting hobby. It was about shedding light on life itself.

### GOING OUT OF BUSINESS

After a couple of weeks of visiting the store I finally asked, "Are you really going out of business?"

Richard admitted he had no plans in the immediate future, but the thought was always a pleasant one.

Actually, Richard was always going out of business. In the 1950s, Richard had a stamp store in lower Manhattan. Towards the end of his lease, the proprietor announced his plans on making major renovations. There would be no new lease. Richard could only stay three more months. And so the first "going out of business" sign went up. And with it came more customers.

Toward the end of those months, the property owner announced a delay of the planned renovations. Richard could stay an additional three months. The "Going out of Business" sign stayed up and the number of customers grew.

Three months later, another reprieve was given. And naturally, three months later, history repeated. These "three month" temporary extensions continued for two years. Finally, the landlord announced there would be no renovations and Richard could stay.

And so Richard closed down.

He got rid of some inventory, saved the rest, and came home with a considerable amount of cash. At home, in front of his wife and children, he turned over the kitchen table and unscrewed its legs exposing a hollow metal base. In that base he placed the cash and put the table back together. For the next year, Richard wrote, attended graduate courses and read as many books as possible. When the hidden cash in the table was running low, he announced he was going back into the stamp business.

Although back in business, Richard continued to find ways of going out of business. In the mid-60s, he moved the store to the



now famous 140 Nassau Street. In 1986, he closed the store completely. His son Adam, (now 52) remembers helping his father pack and transport over 700 cartons of material to their Port Washington home. The material completely filled the entire basement of that house.

While in Port Washington, he would run an occasional advertisement and fill orders as the mood (or need for liquidity) suited him. Many of his ads featured "closeout" sales, now that he no longer operated a store. Finally, toward the latter part of his life, Richard moved to Chicago to be close to his son, Adam. This naturally gave life to another whole series of "closeout" sales, as he was to retire once again.

### A STORY TELLER AT HEART

The "closeout" advertisements are just the peak of the iceberg of Richard's imagination. He loved to tell stories and amuse his listeners.

"My staff would always know when I was talking with Richard on the phone," says lifetime friend since high school, Paul Gertz.

"I rarely smiled at work," Mr. Gertz continues, "but with Richard I would be openly laughing. His stories were that funny. You couldn't help but laugh," he said.

"My business (selling paper in volume) was not exciting. But the way Richard talked about the stamp business made his business seemed exciting," Gertz continued.

Later in my life, as I took on more job responsibilities, I would occasionally treat myself by calling him. Sometimes it was once a year, frequently it was more often. But he would always tell me stories and I would relax and smile.

His desultory conversations would run the gambit from the current market in stamps to politics to religion. He would make me forget my reality, as he would relate amusing upon amusing stories that, although grounded in stamps, somehow also transcended into the morality of humankind.

His stories were rarely boring and usually had a moral to them. The theme typically centered on either the decency or the foibles of man—sometimes both.

In a non-fiction short story, he writes of a woman in a mink coat who wishes to buy her grandson in Oregon something interesting since he is an avid collector. Upon learning that much of Richard's stock is beyond the few dollars she expected to pay, she expresses her dismay that grown people do this. Finally she asks, "Mister, are you a normal stamp store?"

### THEATER OF THE ABSURD

And Richard was not.

One would walk in the store and you find a New York State employee who liked to spend four to five hours daily cataloguing material during his "lunch hour." Then there was a man who paid Richard \$30 a week to pick up his garbage, in hopes of finding valuable stamps in the sweepings.

Across from Richard was the coin dealer—at least for the first six months of my visitations. Seeing almost all of the customers go to Richard's side of the store, the coin dealer switched his inventory to comic books declaring, "This is the next big thing that will excite collectors." Still the customers came to see mostly Richard. Then baseball cards replaced the comics! Eventually, everything on that side of the store disappeared.

It was comical watching Richard relate to his father, Sydney.

He rarely spoke and always seemed, to Richard's consternation, underfoot.

Sydney had thick bottle-like glasses, which attested that he was legally blind, and could no longer be a butcher. Rather than be idle, he decided to help his son. His specialty was wrapping in brown paper the packages of sold stamps. Like a large piece of meat, he double wrapped each sold item and tied with it with a string ending in a handle. Richard often did not want his father to wrap up the packages after a sale preferring that they leave the store and make room for new customers. This was especially true during the rush hour of lunchtime when hundreds of workers would descend upon Nassau Street.

"Don't wrap," Richard's voice would command while Sydney patiently made sure each knot was tight.

Adam tells of the time his father finally outsmarted his grandfather. Upon concluding a sale, Richard apologized that they had no wrapping paper left. The customer was almost out the door when Sydney announced, "Wait, I think there is one more handle!"

But it is the visitors that made Richard's an interesting place. Adam tells the story of a customer who entered the stamp store and asked his father if he sold hamburgers. "Without flinching, my father told him to try the shoe store next door." He was serious!

One afternoon, the store was especially busy when a fellow Nassau Street dealer came in and announced he got a painting as part of an estate and it was worth money.

"It has three cows in it," he says with excitement. "The artist's specialty was cow pastures, and the more cows you have in the painting, the more valuable it is."

Richard feigns interest, but he is too busy to respond. There are two men sitting at the counter looking over old albums and a few customers waiting their turn for his attention.

The dealer persisted talking about it, unconscious of any customers. If only he had a fourth cow in it, he bemoaned, waiting for sympathy. There was never any mention of the possible beauty of the painting—only that another cow would bring more value. He then left the store.

Richard started attending to those at the counter and answering the occasional question from the men inspecting his albums. The door flew open and in again came the stamp dealer. This time he is stumbling into the store grappling with a massive wall painting that features three cows.

Besides its awkward size, the most striking feature is the painting's dullness. The oil painting appeared heavily lacquered for protection since everything was a dreary shade of either brown or green. Even the blue sky had a dank green shade to it. One of the cows was staring at the customers with dark brown eyes and only a slightly lighter shade of brown.

The man pointed out the cows and slowly counted them for Richard's sake, "One, two, three," he continued, "if only he could have put a fourth or even fifth cow in it. There is room in the painting for more cows. Don't you think so?" he asks.

The stories are endless. Long-time friend and fellow stamp dealer, Sam Malamud, tells the story of a man walking into Richard's shop and offering to sell him a stamp for \$100. Richard asked if he would lower the price to \$80. The man hesitated, but finally agreed. Richard then asked if he would accept \$60. The scenario repeats until the price goes to \$10. Richard then opens a drawer and pulls out a pile of identical stamps. "Would you buy it from me for one dollar?" he asks.

There was one customer who was especially aggravating to Richard. Almost daily, the customer asked Richard to buy the stamps in his album. Finally, after days of negotiating, they agreed upon a price for the stamps. Richard proceeded to count out his money. "Wait," the man exclaimed, "we haven't discussed a price for the album itself."

### ETHICS ABOVE EVERYTHING

The issue of ethics obsessed him. Almost any conversation with Richard somehow always revolved around the question of ethics. You could tell he thought about this issue a lot, hoping that explaining it would somehow clarify it, or better yet, bring new insight into his mind.

"He tried to be fair in buying someone's collection. That was more important to him than making money," Gertz says

According to his son Adam, he especially did not like to buy stamps from people who had inherited collections. They usually had little knowledge of what they had. He felt no matter what price he offered, the customer would feel cheated. Thus, it was best for everyone to send the holdings to an auction house.

Although he was sometimes cynical, he rarely expressed anger. In all the years I had known him, he only expressed that emotion once in retelling a story. A fellow dealer on Nassau Street sold him a large collection of stamps that consisted of 378 large sets. To the chagrin of the dealer, Richard counted the collection and came up well shy of the number the dealer had specified.

The other dealer laughed it off saying, "You got me."

"I got what?!" Richard's voice would noticeably rise while retelling the story to me. For the rest of his life he had no more commercial dealings with the man.

Occasionally, there was the obvious thief. From their dress and mannerisms, one would surmise they were looking to peddle stolen material. They had almost no knowledge of stamps and did not know whether the U.S. No 1 in the collection had any more value than a current stamp you could purchase at the post office. Richard always refused to buy.

During the early 1960s, heroin dealers found glassine envelopes useful for sorting and then selling their goods. Some stamp stores would sell the glassines at 500 percent markup or better, since they knew they could make a killing. However, Richard would never sell to them.

Nevertheless, his strong ethical stands did not preclude him from playing practical jokes. Across the street from his store was a stamp shop whose owner and Richard did not get along. For a brief period, whenever a drug dealer entered the store asking for glassines, Richard would respond that he is currently out of them.

"However," he would politely explain, "the stamp store across the street has them. Only, just do not listen to the person in the front of the store. He will tell you he does not have any because he is lazy. Insist on speaking to his boss in the back room no matter what the guy in front tells you," Richard continued, knowing his competitor was a one-man only operation.

"Just remember, you have to insist," Richard said.

A typical, yet highly attention-getting Richard Ginensky ad in *Linn's Stamp News* from July 1983. One gets the immediate impression that this man sells a little bit of everything under the sun.

JULY 18, 1983 LINN'S STAMP NEWS 67

## CLOSEOUT

Former stock of RICHARDS, one of Nassau Street's oldest & largest stamp stores! 35 YEAR ACCUMULATION + additional mds. acquired or consigned for

### IMMEDIATE LIQUIDATION!

OVER 2 TONS OF 19TH & 20TH CENTURY MATERIAL. STOCK RANGES FROM LARGE INTACT COLLECTIONS OF STAMPS & COVERS TO UNUSUAL & SELDOM OFFERED SPECIALIZED ITEMS ... FROM LARGE UNSORTED BULK CARTONS TO U.S. & FOREIGN CLASSICS, ETC. ETC.

### SCARCE & EARLY BRITISH AFRICA

**NATAL 1869-1904.** Comprehensive collection in specialty pages with more than a majority of all of the stamps issued by Natal. Collection starts with #1 (\$600) an illusive and embossed stamp that most collectors have never even seen! After 1869 the condition is generally Fine or better, but prior to this date average copies will be found. Overall, everything is presentable, sound, saleable and quite scarce! Catalogue \$2200+. CLOSEOUT PRICE \$548.

**SUDAN 1897-1951.** Substantial collection on Specialized Album pages with a profusion of early Pictorials, Pyramids, Camels, Animals, Natives, etc. Also included are Early Airmails. Condition is fine throughout! Catalogue \$300. CLOSEOUT PRICE \$139.

### PHONE FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

### BOOKS OF GERMANIC CLASSICS

The following are retail display books from my former Nassau Street store, with each stamp presented & identified on a separate page. There may be some overlapping but basically there is excellent variety & diversification. Condition ranges from Average to Very Fine. Average may include minor flaws seen upon close inspection but not outright damaged. Fine copies will be found throughout these books!

Retail prices were determined as follows: The Fine or better, 50%-60% of Scott. Good or Average copies, at 25%. YOU WILL NOW BE PURCHASING THIS MATERIAL AT MUCH LESS THAN 1/2 PRICE! These books were originally priced about 5 years ago. Catalogue prices shown in this ad are reliable estimates made by me over a year ago.

**BOOK #1 BADEN & BAVARIA** Catalogue \$3,070. Retail \$1,314. CLOSEOUT PRICE \$695.

**BOOK #4 BRUNSWICK** Catalogue \$3,360. Retail \$1,372. CLOSEOUT PRICE \$675.

**BOOK #6 HAMBURG, MECKLENBURG - STRELITZ** Catalogue \$1,192. Retail \$630. CLOSEOUT PRICE \$349.

**BOOK #8 SAXONY.** Catalogue \$1,169. Retail \$363. CLOSEOUT PRICE \$195.

**BOOK #9 THURN & TAXIS NORTHERN DISTRICT** Catalogue \$2,780. Retail \$1,040. CLOSEOUT PRICE \$435.

**BOOK #10 THURN & TAXIS SOUTHERN DISTRICT** Retail \$1,365. CLOSEOUT PRICE \$565.

**BOOK #11 BAVARIA 1858-1911,** Catalogue \$3,480. Retail \$1,235. CLOSEOUT PRICE \$550.

**BOOK #12 NORTH GERMAN CONFEDERATION** Catalogue \$1,500. Retail \$587. CLOSEOUT PRICE \$299.

### UNUSUAL JOB LOTS & COLLECTIONS

**FIJI JOB LOT.** Small accumulation of early material from this scarce country. Includes, for example, a Very Fine Used copy of #16 (Catalogue \$225) also #45 Used & Unused, also early Postage Dues, King George, Elizabeth, etc. Catalogue \$600. CLOSEOUT PRICE \$228.

**GIBRALTAR 1846-1950.** Collection on Specialized Pages. Most of the value is in 19th Century to before WW II. This is a copious, comprehensive, clean and almost complete collection. Also very pretty & very scarce. HIGHLY RECOMMENDED! Catalogue \$1,000. CLOSEOUT PRICE \$433.

**REUNION 1855-1947.** Specialized Collection on Album pages with most of the value in stamps from the 19th Century to WW I. Condition throughout is excellent! Catalogue \$1,250. CLOSEOUT PRICE \$447.

**NOSSI-BE & OBOCK 1892-1894.** On Specialized Album pages. These 2 obscure countries only existed for a few years in the late 19th Century. Nossi-Bé has most of the issues of 1894, & Obock similarly complete for 1892-1894 condition in excellent throughout. These stamps are missing in most private collections. Catalogue \$1,040. CLOSEOUT PRICE \$440.

**SURINAM 1873-1900.** On Specialty pages. This is a most desirable collection of 19th & 20th Century with emphasis in the early stamp. Condition is generally excellent throughout! Catalogue Value \$950+. CLOSEOUT PRICE \$348.

**NEW CALEDONIA 1881-1902.** Like the above, this is a comprehensive & top quality collection of 19th & 20th Century stamps with those hard to get early issues, in lovely condition! The collection contains over 90% of all the stamps issued between 1881 to 1930. (Most Unusual!) The later stamps abound in pretty Commemoratives & light colored Airmails, mostly all Mint. This is a most desirable collection with no problem! Catalogue Value \$1,948.60. CLOSEOUT PRICE \$785.

**P.S.** A bonus or cash discount is available for all the above lots. As for example you do not wish a bonus with New Caledonia deduct \$94.32 (which is 12%) and remit \$691.

This went on for several months until the dealer came into Richard's store lamenting how he could not seem to get rid of drug dealers who wanted to buy glassines from him. Richard felt pity and stopped the practical joke.

Because of these dynamics, I continued my visits to Nassau Street, and visited the busy store that was eternally going out of business.

However, life is temporal. Perhaps people collect as a way of accepting this. No one thought more about such things than Richard Ginensky did. My time visiting his store was closing. My former boss had been named a Commissioner by the then Governor of New York. He had offered me a wonderful position in Albany.

Through Richard, it was obvious that my knowledge of stamps and running a small business increased greatly. More subtly, I gained a greater understanding of other things that served me well.

From him I learned about some basics regarding negotiating. From my then rather limited experience, asking for a lower price was never an option. You either accepted or rejected an offer, for fear of insulting the seller.

"You cannot say yes every time to my first offer," he would patiently advise.

"But I trust you," I would respond.

"It is not an issue of trust," he would advise, believing I was finally catching on.

But in truth, I never caught on—at least not with him. In my later life, I would travel the world and be quite adept at "discussing prices."

Several years ago, I had just finished reading a book by Donald Trump, who advises the reader to request a discount always. I informed my wife how Richard had taught me that tool and how inept I was when I first tried. I told her I was going to show off what I had learned. We were moving from Florida and that day we had to pay five rather large bills that included a car repair, rental fees, and other expenses. By day's end, we realized a savings of close to 40 percent.

"You can thank Richard for that," I told her.

#### NOT A STAMP GUY

"Richard was never a philatelist," says Stanley M. Piller, noted expert in U.S. classics who, among other accomplishments, is an expertizer for the PSE, PF, and APS. Mr. Piller began working for Richard in September 1963 as a senior in college.

One day," Piller continues, "I walked into Richard's store and pointed out to him the items he had catalogued incorrectly. He hired me immediately."

"He was easy to work for. He never yelled. But I wouldn't consider him a philatelist," says Piller whose cousin (Abe Gittler) also sold stamps on Nassau Street.

Neither Richard, his good friends, or either of his sons would disagree with Piller.

"My dad never saw himself as a stamp dealer," Adam states.

Both Adam and Daniel go on to tell the story of how their father accidentally became a stamp dealer.

Together with a partner, Jack Spector, they opened a store in Brooklyn dedicated to buying and selling books with social science themes.

"Neither of us had any interest in collecting stamps," then partner and lifelong friend, Jack Spector says.

The store, according to his son, Adam, was located in a neighborhood of mostly blue-collar workers of German descent. The former tenant had left them a stand stocked with stamp packets—the majority of which sold for 15 cents or less. To both partners surprise, the stamps brought in more money than their out of date textbooks.

This became so apparent that eventually Richard went on and just sold stamps.

In his eulogy of Richard, Mr. Spector says, "Rich had personally no interest in the collecting that impassioned his customers. He paid attention especially to philatelists with a mania for collecting, sometimes spending more than they could afford. His sympathetic ear elicited their collecting problems, which actually contained subtexts of personal difficulty of which they were unaware. To them, he became the "stamp psychotherapist" who dispensed wise counsel. I fantasize that his clients stretched out on couch-sized stamp albums, spilling their guts to their Freudian dealer. Rich did this with great and profound humanity, even identifying with them in their misery."

Richard writes of his lack of knowledge in a story he wrote in 1973. In it, his wife asks why is he in the stamp business, especially since he claims to know little about them. He writes:

"Can you find self-expression in stamps," she asks. "Yes, I say, yes yes yes yes yes yes yes." She says, "Don't quote me James Joyce." Says she, "Once you wanted to be a writer, you have talent to be a writer not a stamp dealer, and" she gently says, "Richard, are you crazy...?"

"Call me Richard," he would say, "I will write you a Moby Dick of the stamp business...."

And a Moby Dick of a business he did create.

"He sold stamps as a way of communicating with the world," says Richard Drews, formerly known as the "Stamp King."

"I was in graduate school in the Chicago area when I first answered one of Richard's ads. I soon became a regular customer and frequent correspondent with him. Look at his picture. He has this big, pleasant open face you couldn't help but trust. And he would describe material that sounded like you wanted it right now."

Mr. Drews kept up his correspondence with Richard even after he stopped buying his stamps. "He seemed to always have time for me."

Long time friend, Paul Gertz, has similar memories.

"I spent years dumbing down without realizing it. My focus was on day-to-day survival. But when you spoke to Richard you got the bigger philosophical issues where there were no easy answers," Gertz says.

"He was a nit-picker and had a different perception of the world because of that. He would take a position against the prevailing system just for the sake of making people think. When the Beatles first came along, he was one of my few contemporaries who liked them. I never knew if he really did enjoy them or just found interesting how people would react to the unexpected." Gertz says.

There are numerous stories of Richard saying the unexpected to see people react. He once signed up for a boat ride in Maine that promised the wonders of observing sea lions. When the sea lions appeared as promised, all the sightseers went to the starboard side of the boat to observe and take pictures—all except, of course, Richard. He walked to the opposite side of the boat. When the Captain approached him, Richard asked about the sea lions. "They look fat and would look good on a grill. Can you eat them?"



"Richard was sometimes not polite," Gertz continues, "He would ask questions that we all were afraid to ask for fear of being considered impolite."

"He was always questioning," Gertz continues. "I would feel uncomfortable when he did this, but he was right. You were taking for granted what you shouldn't. He was not polite at times, but you knew he was right."

### THE DARK SIDE

Mr. Gertz states that Richard was a complex man who sometimes had a dark side.

"Richard liked black or what some people refer to as 'sick' humor. Sometimes, it was not so funny. At the Port Washington pharmacy, he asked the adolescents working there if they could sell him a cemetery plot," said Gertz.

"He could never appreciate success. He would tell me that if things go well, that doesn't make him happy. If things go badly, that doesn't necessarily make him sad either," says Gertz.

After his wife died, I went to visit him and he talked of his marriage. Early in his marriage, his wife complained that his outlook was so dour it helped foster her own depressing thoughts. He immediately closed the store and came to her. He continued by saying how he missed Miriam, for together they had worked at what he felt was a strong marriage.

Perhaps Richard's complexity is best summed up in a note Daniel sent me, saying it was typical of his father's thinking.

"My goal is to know everything in self-help books" Richard wrote in a notebook in 1992, "Now that I know everything, what am I supposed to do?"

### NOT THE PERFECT BUSINESSMAN

Stanley Piller tells several stories of when he worked for Richard and urged him to buy items that would have greatly increased in value.

"But he was not a stamp dealer," Piller continues, "He was more of a junk dealer."

"While he did well in business, he could have done better," Mr. Gertz says. "He just was not ambitious in that way. He got bored with the business at times."

Richard never saw himself as a great businessman. Many times in our conversations, he would refer to his early days when if he sold a lot of material he would just shut down the store and write.

"My father was never a great businessman," Adam says. "During the Watergate, period we would have the television on and watch the hearings. When a customer entered, my father would tell them he didn't have whatever they wanted and they should come back tomorrow."

"My father was incredibly inefficient in the way he did business," Adam continues. "He would write elaborate descriptions that were not necessary to sell the stamps. He also would take elaborate measures to catalogue what he mailed out, so if the customer pilfered from him he would know."

"Except," Adam continues, "no one ever returned the boxes. He would put in so many extras that it wasn't reasonable to return anything. He called these 'unadvertised bonuses.'"

Richard Drews remembers those special gifts.

"He would figure out what you liked to collect and send you a package. Everything in it would be as he had described, but there was always something extra," Drews said.

"He would write, 'Bet you don't have this item!'"

"Have it?" I would write back. "I didn't even know it existed," Drews said.

Both sons remember what their father referred to as, "little hidden treasures."

"He took tremendous pleasure in assembling lots that he thought his customers would enjoy. When people responded to his ad, he would pore over the letter, sometimes calling them, to ascertain what they most enjoyed about collecting. He would then attempt to individualize it to the collector's interest," Daniel said.

"In each carton he always added what he referred to as 'little hidden treasures.' This could be a pair of high quality stamp tongs or a packet of hinges no longer in production. But most likely, it would be a selection of stamps that would be intriguing to the buyer. The little hidden treasure was not necessarily of great value. Instead, the criteria was that it would be something that would not be expected, yet be pleasing to the buyer," Daniel said.

And while Richard may not have been the most efficient businessman, he did have a strong sense of business as well as human nature. A friend, facing financial bankruptcy, owed one business \$5,000, but could only afford \$3,000.

"Call this man and tell him you will give him \$3,000 then. He will refuse, but do not say anything other than be polite," Richard advised.

Richard's friend made the phone call. As expected, the vendor refused to accept the \$3,000 as full payment. Dejected, Richard's friend returned. "Now call back," Richard instructed, "and tell him your partner is angry at you for offering so much. Tell him the money is off the table."

Soon thereafter, the debt was settled for \$3,000.

### THE CHANGING SEASONS

In 1994, Richard's wife, Miriam, died. I visited him a few times at his Port Washington home. The house seemed different. Packages were on the floor and in other places where they would not normally be when she was alive. There were other differences. One felt the void.

Adam and Daniel said their father did not enjoy going out much. He usually did it to appease his wife. Upon his wife's death, Richard stayed home more and more and did what he enjoyed most—reading.

He took me up to his bedroom and showed me his prized possessions—bookshelf upon bookshelf of tomes that included a wide array of interests. He told me he spent much time thinking and was going to put those thoughts to paper.

We went down to the basement. White cardboard boxes of unknown treasures filled the room. He'd also purchased a computer though didn't know how to use it. I helped that day for a while.

He wanted more help so I suggested he hire my nephew who was in college. For several hours a week, my nephew helped Richard and he eventually succeeded in even emailing Richard's son Daniel, who resided in Israel. Each week my nephew would come back and relate a story Richard had told him.

And so there is one more young man who is filled with stories from Richard.

Soon afterwards, he moved to Chicago to be close to his son Adam. The place he had was large enough to accommodate his inventory. But even larger than the room for his inventory was the room dedicated to his books.

In Chicago, he lived out his days reading, occasionally placing advertisements and filling orders and babysitting for Adam's two children.

Once, when Daniel (who has four children) came to visit from Israel, Richard took all six grandchildren out to a department store. He informed his son that he intended to teach them two lessons. First, that life could have limitless opportunities, and secondly, when you make a promise, you keep it.

Upon arrival, the children were informed that they could buy anything in the store they wanted.

At first, the grandchildren were really hesitant. Used to the restrictions typically placed by parents, they would ask their grandfather if "anything" included a particularly expensive item. Richard only repeated that they could get anything they wanted and he would pay for it. In the end, each child had the gift of their choice. The total cost, according to Daniel, was less than a few hundred dollars.

"My father expressed satisfaction that he achieved his goals," Daniel said. For the grandchildren, it was a memory not soon forgotten.

And so Richard continued his days reading his books, and enjoying the many opportunities he had to interact with his six grandchildren.

His 80th birthday was coming up and his sons wanted to do something special.

"At first, he was against any idea of a party," Daniel says. "But after a few days reflection he agreed to the party with conditions."

First, there would be no cake. Nor would there be any balloons and decorations of any kind. Instead, the birthday party would be held over a two-day period and focus on a series of philosophical seminars. Naturally, no food or other distractions would be allowed during these seminars. He provided his sons with a list of people he considered close friends—the majority of whom he had

not seen for over 50 years. Not surprisingly, some of these friends had become professors during their lives.

To his son's amazement, many of his old friends showed up and participated in timed discussions of such subjects as:

- The meaning of life.

- The role of God in this world when they were growing up as compared to early 21st century.

- What is happiness?

They also read and analyzed poetry.

"For my father," Daniel says, "this was a perfect party."

In August 2005, he went into the hospital. There, on August 25 he died.

"The day before he went into the hospital," Adam's wife Carol says, "he said he was ready to give up smoking." Carol says she smiled to show him she understood his humor.

For 53 years, Richard Ginensky sold stamps. He wasn't a collector, but left behind literally tons of material to his sons.

"It was one of the larger holdings our auction house ever handled," says David Kols, president of Regency Superior Stamps in St. Louis, Mo., regarding what Richard's sons consigned to him. The collection extended over two separate auctions. It was well received.

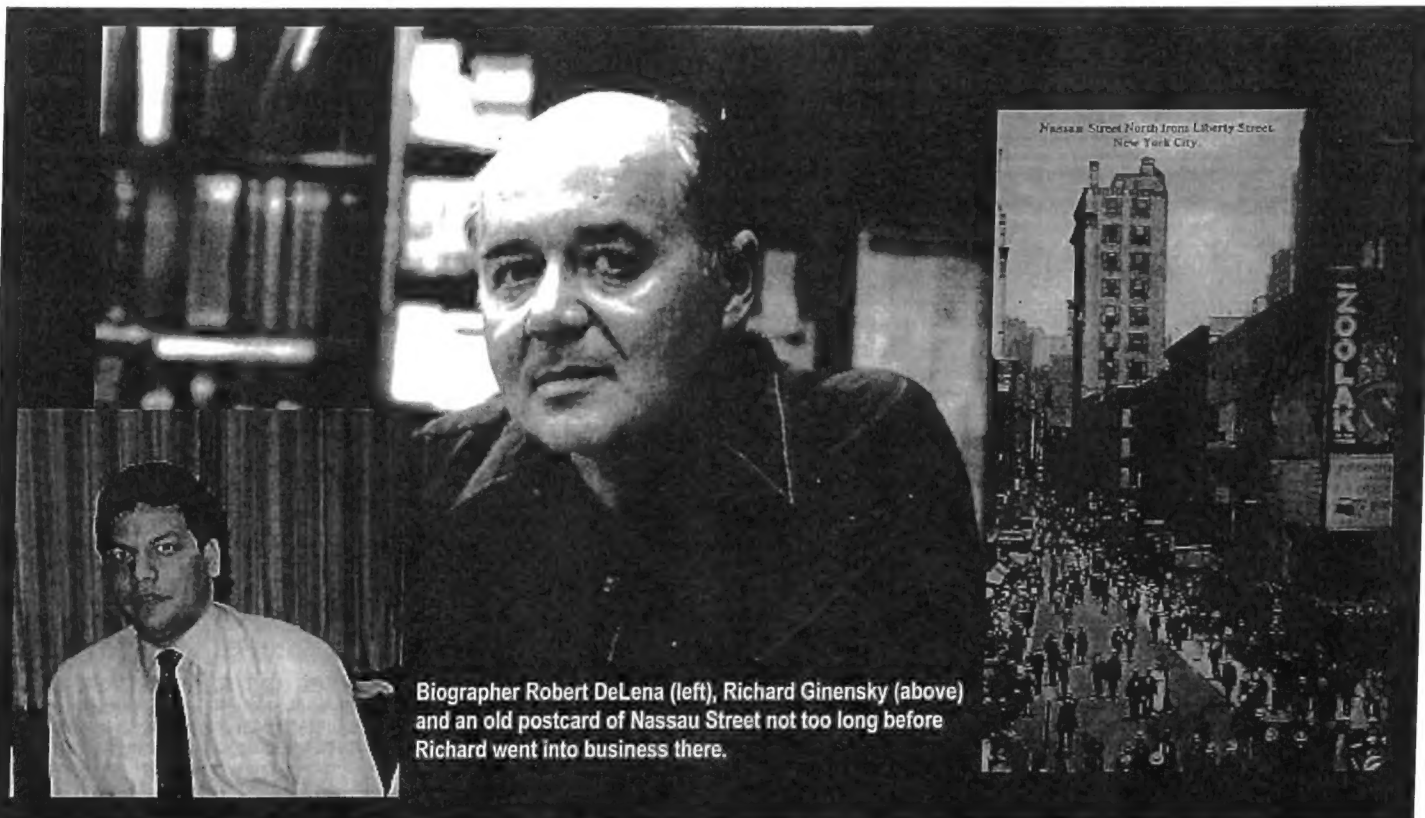
My own father never met Richard. And, as my father might say, he spoke different English than we did. But I think my father would be proud of the friend I picked.

"A man walked into Richard's store and wanted to sell his collection," Sam Malamud says when asked to give a story that typifies Richard.

"How much do you want?" Richard asks.

"Would you give me \$1,000?" the man responds.

Richard looks over the high value part of the stamp album and then closes it. "Would you take \$2,500? That's what it is worth to me." ☒



Biographer Robert DeLena (left), Richard Ginensky (above) and an old postcard of Nassau Street not too long before Richard went into business there.